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ABSTRACT

The process of interpersonal self-disclosure is a complex one that is contingent upon a number of interacting factors. Most self-disclosing relationships are characterized by a dyadic interaction (a relationship between two individuals); the use of nonverbal cues in the communicaton of personality states, moods, and feelings; trust and acceptance; and reciprocity. Among the interacting factors that must be considered in discussing a person's decision to disclose are the following: the background and personality of the discloser, the nature of the relationship between discloser and receiver, the discloser's perceptions of the receiver, the content of the disclosure, the social context within which the disclosures are made, and the receiver's reaction (feedback) to the disclosure. A communication model may be used to illustrate the relationships among these factors. (GW)

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ELEMENTS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

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The act of self-disclosure can serve valuable functions toward improving interpersonal growth and self-awareness. However, being open and honest with others is much more complex in actual practice. The wife who decides to use her newly learned encounter group behaviors with her husband by "baring her soul" may regret such a decision. The manager's enthusiasm for the importance of sensitivity training may be thwarted upon return to an organization where such "open and honest" behaviors are not rewarded. The value of self-disclosure as a growth facilitating behavior is contingent upon a number of interacting factors. In his book, The Interpersonal Process of Self-Disclosure, (1968) Culbert emphasizes the importance of "contingency logic" in discussing the value of self-disclosure.

> Most expositions on self-disclosure have argued that self-disclosure is good, positively valued, growth facilitating, or that in some way it adds meaning to a person's life. While such expositions usually specify contexts which seem to justify these claims, a more comprehensive position is that "it depends"; for self-disclosure may also result in bad, negatively valued, growth-inhibiting outcomes. (p. 6)

The notion that in judging the effectiveness of certain behaviors one must consider the particular set of circumstances operating in a given situation is not a new theoretical perspective. The importance of "contingency theory" has received much support from experts interested in determining the most functional leadership styles and managerial climates for particular situations.

According to the research done by Fiedler, (1967), the effectiveness of specific leadership styles on group effectiveness can only be

understood by examining situational variables. Fiedler's model contains three major factors: (1) the leader's position power, (2) the structure of the task, and (3) the personal relationships between leaders and members. Fiedler's research suggests that a consideration of these factors will help determine the style of leadership most appropriate for a given situation. In other words, there are some situations where a directive, task-oriented leader may be most functional while non-directive, human relations-oriented leaders may be more desirable in other situations.

Much has been written about the importance of promoting the proper organizational climate in order to improve performance. The literature seems to contain an obvious bias in favor of Theory Y or participative climate as opposed to a Theory X or authoritarian climate. However, recently researchers are interpreting their findings to support a "contingency theory" of management, (Morse and Larsen, 1970). According to this theoretical perspective, there is no one best managerial style or climate. The effective managerial style or climate is the one that is tailored to fit the task and the people.

To suggest that a more participative interpersonal leadership style or managerial climate is the most desirable is indicative of a failure to consider the importance of contingency logic. According to Redding, this fallacy occurs when

> . . . practitioner, student or researcher ignore the fact that any organizational relationships, between or among whatever variables, may be crucially affected by the particular set of circumstances operating in a given case. (1968, p. 105)

Likewise, to suggest that self-disclosure is always a positive, growth-facilitating experience shows little regard for the importance of contingency theory. In judging the effect of self-disclosing behavior, consideration must be given to situational variables. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the specific nature of the self-disclosing relationship and the situational variables which may help explain its effects, both positive and negative.

Nature of the Self-Disclosing Relationship

Think about the last time you decided you needed to get something very personal "off your chest" and out into the open. To whom did you disclose? Why did you choose this person? How did the person being disclosed to respond? How did you communicate the disclosure? By answering these questions and others, this section will attempt to identify the factors helpful in understanding the self-disclosing relationship.

Dyadic Relationships

It is logical to suggest that self-disclosing behavior is more likely to occur within the context of the dyadic relationship. Pearce and Sharp (1973) suggest:

> Although levels of disclosure in interpersonal, public and mass communication situations have not been compared in any one study, there is good evidence that individuals are highly selective in choosing persons to whom to disclose and that the number of communicators in the transaction affects the probability of the development of high levels of disclosure. (p. 417)

The traditional client-therapist relationship is built on the premise that establishing an effective relationship between therapist and client lies at the bases of effective counseling. When such a

relationship is established, client disclosure will likely increase. Since relationships are often complicated with the addition of more people, it makes sense to assume that high level disclosures are typically made to one other selected individual. However, it is important to note that self-disclosure can occur in the context of groups. The success of any encounter group experience, for example, is dependent on its ability to establish a climate conducive to group member disclosure. Because of the number of possible relationships involved in such a context, it takes longer to develop the climate necessary for such disclosure.

Nonverbal Cues

When we think of self-disclosing behavior we generally refer to the verbal content of the messages that are communicated to others. However, disclosures are also expressed through the communication of nonverbal cues. Since the act of disclosure involves the personal expression of feelings and emotions, the role of nonverbal cues is apparent.

While the relationship between self-disclosure and nonverbal behavior makes intuitive sense, few studies have investigated this relationship. Jourard and Rubin (1968) hypothesized that in intimate relationships where self-disclosure is a means of bringing individuals closer together, one should find that measures of self-disclosure and physical contact (touching) should be related. Jourard found virtually no correlation between these two modes of interpersonal relatedness. These results are not surprising considering the cultural norms with respect to touching in our society. In another study, Jourard (1970) assessed the relationship between subject self-disclosure and varied

degrees of experimenter "distance." Jourard found that in situations where the subject likes and trusts the experimenter, attempts by the experimenter to reduce the "distance" helped rather than inhibited self-disclosure from the subjects.

There is some research to suggest that nonverbal cues are important in communicating the mood, feeling, and affective state of the discloser. Even though the conclusions of these studies are based on the observation of patients in psychiatric interviews, they support the notion that nonverbal behaviors play an important role in the disclosure of personality states, moods, and feelings.

Mahl et al. (1959) concluded that it was possible to predict major personality characteristics by observing the gestures and body movements of patients during psychiatric interviews. Using topics which had been judged as disturbing and nondisturbing, Sainesbury (1955) measured gestural movements (primarily movements of hands) made by patients during psychiatric interviews. He found that gestural activity increased with the periods of disturbance. Dittmann (1962) also studied the relationship between body movement and stated moods or feelings of patients. His study indicated that postural-gestural cues were influential in demonstrating various moods and feeling states. Rosenfeld (1966) was concerned with the affiliative functions of facial and gestural activity. The conclusions of this study indicated that overall gestural activity was greater for subjects in the approval-seeking condition, with smiles characterizing the nature of the affective state and gesticulation characterizing the intensity of the affect.

A number of studies have demonstrated the primary importance of the face in determining certain affective states. Dittmann, Parloff, and

Boomer (1965) attempted to determine whether observers gained more information from facial cues than from bodily cues in judging certain affective states. While they discovered that information about the affect was communicated by both body and facial cues, they emphasized the "superiority" of facial cues. By comparing the ability of trained versus untrained judges to determine judgments of therapist warmth, genuineness, and empathy by viewing facial expressions and bodily cues, Shapiro et al. (1969) found facial cues to be the most discriminating factor. Ekman's (1964, 1965) research on head and body cues in the judgment of emotion demonstrated the superiority of the face as the primary affect display system. Ekman surmised that since the rate of facial expressions far exceeds the rate of bodily acts, determinations of certain affective states can more frequently be made from head than from body cues. Bodily cues, according to Ekman and Friesen (1967, 1969), were important in determining the intensity of the affective state.

Since the act of self-disclosure involves the communication of moods, feelings, and affective states by both the discloser and the person being disclosed to, the role of nonverbal cues is most significant. With respect to the research cited above, the following conclusions concerning the relationship between self-disclosure and nonverbal behavior seem appropriate:

1. Since most disclosures are characterized by the communication of moods, feelings, and affective states, nonverbal behaviors play an important role in the communication of meaning.
2. Because of social and cultural connotations, the

importance of touching during the act of disclosure is somewhat questionable. However, it may characterize intimate relationships between members of the opposite sex.

3. During the act of disclosure, there will be a general increase in gestural, facial, and bodily activity.
4. The face communicates information with regard to the type of emotion, feeling, or affective state being expressed.
5. Bodily cues help communicate the intensity of the particular emotion, feeling, or affective state being expressed.

Trust and Acceptance

In describing the nature of the self-disclosing relationship, most experts in the field mention the importance of trust. While it makes intuitive sense that before one engages in disclosures, one must trust the person being disclosed to, few actual research studies have been conducted to test this assumption. In an attempt to gather data from superior-subordinate relationships in a research organization, Mellinger (1956) found the degree of trust existing between superiors and their subordinates to be a major determinant in a subordinate's willingness to communicate openly with his superior. He found that subjects who did not trust the recipient of their messages tended to conceal their feelings toward mutually relevant topics. According to Mellinger,

> An individual who lacks trust in the person to whom he communicates tends to conceal his own attitudes resulting in messages which are evasive, compliant, or aggressive. (p. 309)

In support of Mellinger's findings, Read (1962) found mobility aspirations among subordinates to be negatively related to the accuracy of upward communication; however, the amount of inaccuracy was affected by the degree of trust the subordinate had in his superior. (1971)

The studies reviewed above lend some empirical support to the relationship between trust and disclosure. However, as conceptually sound as this relationship appears, more research is needed. Since much has been written about trust as a variable important in the process of interpersonal communication, it seems appropriate to discuss the implications of the trust literature in understanding the self-disclosing relationship.

The conceptual ambiguity which surrounds the interpersonal variable "trust" has posed numerous problems for researchers. As a result, many different conceptualizations of trust exist in the literature. Giffin has suggested the following definition of trust:

> . . . the reliance upon the communication behavior of another person in order to achieve a desired but uncertain goal in a risky situation.

Inherent in this definition of trust is the degree of confidence or trust that one person has for another. This kind of trust (of a speaker by a listener) has been called "ethos" by Aristotle and "source credibility" by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley. (1953) In a detailed review of factor-analytic credibility studies as they relate to interpersonal trust, Giffin concludes that trust of a speaker appears to be influenced by a listener's perception of the following characteristics of a speaker:

1. Expertness relevant to the topic under discussion; this expertise may be in the form of quantity of pertinent information, degree of

ability or skill, or validity of judgment.

2. Reliability; this may be perceived as dependability, predictability, consistency, or intentions of the trusted person regarding the goals or objectives of the person doing the trusting.
3. Dynamism; that is, behavior perceived as more active than passive and more open or frank than closed or reserved.

If we agree that disclosures are generally made to persons whom we trust, then it follows that disclosures will likely be made to those individuals who display behaviors which are characterized by expertness, reliability, and dynamism. In other words, one of the ways of increasing the likelihood that others will disclose to you is through instilling trust. Therefore, adopting behaviors which display your expertness, reliability, and dynamism will likely increase the trust that others have in you.

Another important aspect in understanding the interpersonal variable trust is the degree to which the speaker trusts the listener. Carl Rogers (1951) uses the terms "acceptance" and "psychological safety" to describe this aspect of trust. According to Rogers, "acceptance behavior" refers to the therapist's behavior which is perceived by the client as demonstrating trust by the therapist toward the client. Rogers is suggesting that the client's perception of such trusting behavior creates the necessary "psychological safety" for client disclosure.

Before a person can develop the necessary trust for disclosure, he must perceive that the person being disclosed to accepts and supports

him. One way to demonstrate this support is to display behaviors characteristic of the attitude known as "unconditional positive regard." According to Rogers and Truax (1967), this philosophy is considered essential to the development of a successful therapeutic relationship.

> A second condition which is hypothesized as essential for therapeutic movement and change is the experiencing by the therapist of an unconditional positive regard for the client. This means that the therapist communicates to his client a deep and genuine caring for him as a person with human potentialities, a caring uncontaminated by evaluations of his thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. The therapist experiences a warm acceptance of the client's experience as being a part of the client as a person, and places no conditions on his acceptance and warmth. He prizes the client in a total rather than a conditional way. He does not accept certain feelings in the client and disapprove others. He feels an unconditional positive regard or warmth for this person. This is an outgoing, positive feeling without reservations and without evaluations. It means not making jugments. (pp. 97-108)

Further evidence concerning the principle of acceptance and supportive behavior can be found by reviewing the work of Jack Gibb. (1965) After analyzing tapes from group discussions, Gibb proposes two communication climates -- one "defensive" and the other "supportive." Gibb describes six types of nonaccepting behaviors which produce "defensiveness" in others. These behaviors include communication identified as (1) evaluative, (2) control-oriented, (3) strategy-oriented, (4) neutral (detached), (5) expressive of superiority feelings, and (6) certainty-oriented (dogmatic). Gibb also identifies communication behaviors conducive to a "supportive" climate. These are (1) description, (2) problem-orientation, (3) spontaneity, (4) empathy, (5) equality, and (6) provisionalism. Gibb suggests that a person who perceives a climate as defensive is less likely to be open and honest with others. On the other hand, supportive climates encourage more

open and honest behaviors.

In an attempt to apply his concepts to management, Gibb (1965) discusses the differences between "defensive managing" and "participative managing." Gibb sees defensive management as characterized by "low trust, data distortion, persuasion, and high control." This unsupportive, untrusting, unaccepting climate encourages the distortion and concealment of information. Gibb's description of the "defensive manager" is revealing.

> He distorts and conceals data about himself and his feelings by creating a variety of hypocritical and falso behaviors for camouflaging his real feelings . . . he develops a variety of techniques in order to manipulate people, to accomplish prexistent goals and to "get along with people," instead of encouraging the free flow of feelings and information throughout the organization. (p. 200)

On the other hand, Gibb sees high trust and confidence in people as essential elements in participative managing. His discussion underscores the importance of trust, confidence, warmth and acceptance in creating a supportive climate. Once the individual feels accepted, he will be more likely to engage in open communication.

> Accepting himself, and feeling little fear of exposure, one who feels adequate both as a person and as a manager can be open and direct in sharing information, feelings and attitudes, without censoring or manipulating data, and with a minimum of apprehension about the effects of presenting it, he is able to establish a free exchange of information in all directions. (p. 207)

The importance of accepting and supportive behaviors in promoting the trust necessary for disclosure has received support from empirical research. Studies by Colson (1968) and Taylor, Altman and Sorrentino (1969) support the notion that engaging in accepting and supportive responses will increase the frequency and depth of one's self-disclosure.

In an attempt to study the effects of acceptance and reciprocation of self-disclosures on the development of trust, Johnson and Noonan (1972) concluded:

> A person will trust the other more when the other responds to the person's self-disclosure with acceptance rather than rejection, and when the other reciprocates the person's self-disclosures than when he does not. (p. 411)

When one is interested in expressing acceptance behaviors, how does one respond? In the study above, the researchers operationalized the expression of acceptance as

> . . . the expression of warmth towards and interest in the subject's self-disclosures . . .. In the acceptance conditions, trained confederates behaved in caring warm ways although they never agreed with the subject's position. Verbal statements such as "I understand," "I see how you feel," "That's an interesting point," were used. Nonverbally, the confederates smiled, used a warm, interested tone of voice, used direct eye contact, leaned towards the subjects, and in general looked interested in what the subject was saying. (p. 412)

In summary, the degree of trust which characterizes a relationship remains an important determinant in one's decision to disclose. In order to build trust and increase the likelihood that others will disclose to you, the following suggestions are noted:

1. Display behaviors which cause others to perceive you as expert, reliable, and dynamic.
2. Create a climate conducive to supportive rather than defensive communication.
3. Show unconditional positive regard for the other person.

4. Respond to disclosures with acceptance rather than rejection.
5. Reciprocate the other person's self-disclosures.

Reciprocity

In defining the nature of the self-disclosing relationship, our discussion would be incomplete without considering reciprocity. The notion that "openness begets openness" has its roots in psychotherapy. Rogers suggests that self-disclosure on the part of the therapist is a necessary if not sufficient condition for successful therapy. Jourard, like Rogers, views self-disclosure as a valuable psychotherapeutic tool and extends the point by suggesting that the therapist's self-disclosure prompts self-disclosure on the part of the client (the so-called "dyadic effect"). In Jourard's opinion, reciprocal self-disclosure in the therapy session serves to develop in the client the ability to self-disclose appropriately.

There are a number of studies which lend empirical support for the reciprocal nature of disclosure. Studies by Jourard and Landsman (1959) and Tognoli (1969) have noted that intimate disclosure acts as a reinforcer by encouraging the receiver to match the intimacy level. A study by Jourard and Jaffe (1970) on the influence of an interviewer's disclosure on the self-disclosing behavior of interviewees, indicated that subjects matched the length of utterance and level of disclosure "modeled" by the interviewer. These studies lend support to the thesis that if one wishes to invite disclosure from another person, an effective means of doing so is to engage in the activity oneself.

Even though these studies are obviously supportive of the reciprocity thesis, some researchers have questioned its application, particularly at higher levels of disclosure. (Leven and Gergen, 1969) While the disclosure of highly personal information may be satisfying to the discloser and bring salient rewards, the increased anxiety which often accompanies such disclosures may be a more powerful determinant restricting reciprocity. In other words, there is a curvilinear effect operation: the likelihood of reciprocity will increase with higher levels of disclosure up to a point at which disclosure of highly personal information will decrease the likelihood of reciprocity.

As much intuitive sense as the curvilinear effect makes in discussing reciprocity, it has not been strongly supported by empirical research. One explanation may be that the studies supportive of the positive relationship between likelihood of reciprocity and increased disclosure were conducted in laboratory settings. Since subjects involved in laboratory research on self-disclosure usually do not see each other and the perceived likelihood of future interaction between subjects is minimal, it is not surprising that subjects will experience small increases in anxiety with higher level disclosures. It is possible that the curvilinear effect would occur in situations where subjects do perceive the likelihood of future interaction with the other person.

What is the explanation for the reciprocal nature of disclosure? One explanation is that there is a social norm which demands reciprocity. (Gouldner, 1960) A second explanation is in terms of the rewards that each expects to gain from the other. According to the logic of exchange theory, in order that a relationship be maintained, each party must be

sufficiently satisfied, and do all in his power to behave in ways to benefit him in the future. (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959)

A study by Worthy, Gary, and Kahn (1969) provides empirical support for the idea that self-disclosure functions in accordance with the theory of social exchange. A major finding of this study was that higher level disclosures were made to those who had received higher level disclosures. This conclusion suggests that the exchange of self-disclosures was affected by the "norm of reciprocity." This finding is consistent with the principle of social exchange which suggests that outcomes exchanged will tend to be of comparable value. Homans used the term "distributive justice" to describe this tendency toward fair exchange.

In explaining the tendency for subjects to reciprocate in their disclosures, Worthy, Gary, and Kahn maintain that being selected as a target for disclosure is rewarding because the discloser is essentially saying, "I like you." "I trust you." Since "being disclosed to" is rewarding, this obligates the other pers. to reciprocate the disclosure.

In sum, most self-disclosing relationships are characterized by:

1. An interaction between two individuals (dyadic relationship);
2. The use of nonverbal cues in the communication of personality states, moods, and feelings;
3. Trust and acceptance;
4. Reciprocity.

Decision to Disclose: A Communication Model

In discussing the complexities surrounding a person's decision to disclose, there are a number of communication variables that must be

considered. As we stated earlier, the value of self-disclosure as a growth-facilitating behavior is contingent upon a number of interacting factors. This section will discuss these factors and their effect on the interpersonal process of self-disclosure. This section will conclude with a model which conceptualizes the process of self-disclosure, and the following communication variables will serve as major components of the model: (1) the discloser; (2) the nature of the relationship between discloser and receiver; (3) the receiver; (4) the content of the disclosure; (5) the social setting; (6) the receiver's reaction (feedback) to the disclosure.

The Discloser

There has been much speculation by experts concerning the relationship between parents, early family interaction patterns, and later adult self-disclosing behaviors. (Cozby, 1973) It seems likely that children whose parents place a value on sociability, extroversion, close family relationships, and open expression of feelings would engage in greater self-disclosing behaviors as adults. A person raised in such a home environment would likely be characterized as having greater needs for affiliation, affection, and inclusion. The development of these needs as children may explain the motivation toward increased self-disclosure patterns, as adults. By establishing close, intimate interpersonal relationships with others through self-disclosure, these individuals are satisfying important interpersonal needs.

The importance of parents, early family interaction patterns, and personality variables has received little conclusive support from research.

A study by Pederson and Higbee (1969) found that disclosure to parents was greater for subjects whose parents were close, warm, friendly, and accepting. However, they also found that females who rated their mothers as cold, distrustful, and selfish scored high on measures of willingness to disclose to strangers, acquaintances, and/or best friends. The authors interpret this finding by suggesting that family relationships may be a more important determinant of whom a person discloses to rather than whether the person is a "high" or "low" discloser.

Even though there have been numerous attempts by researchers to correlate self-disclosure scores with various measures of personality, the correlations are generally low and the findings are often contradictory. The use of the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ) is most often mentioned as a factor in the low correlations found between self-disclosure and measures of personality traits. This is not surprising, since the JSDQ does not appear to measure actual disclosure to others. Perhaps by asking subjects to indicate the degree to which they would be willing to disclose, a more sensitive and accurate measure of disclosure would be obtained.

Some researchers maintain that there is little value in research which continues to explore specific trait-disclosure relationships. (Altman and Taylor, 1973) The approach advocated by these writers is to measure self-disclosure behaviorally and use it as a dependent variable in the design of studies. Such an approach would allow for the introduction of situational variables into the design. Also, the development of more refined measures of self-disclosing behavior would be encouraged by such a design.

Another factor which may affect whether or not a person engages in self-disclosure is the intensity, or subjective importance associated with a particular self-disclosure. To how many others has the information been disclosed? What is the discloser's relationship to those others who do know? How emotionally involved is the discloser? How important are the benefits of disclosure to the discloser? These questions will be explored in an effort to understand how intensity affects one's decision to disclose.

One way of operationalizing intensity is to determine how many others have received the disclosure and the specific relationship of these "other" people to the discloser. Maximum intensity likely occurs with the discloser who has never revealed the information to anyone and has concealed the information for an extended period of time. On the other hand, the intensity decreases as the number of individuals who have received the disclosure increases. (Culbert, 1968) Figure 1 depicts the relationship between degree of intensity and number of others who have received the disclosure.

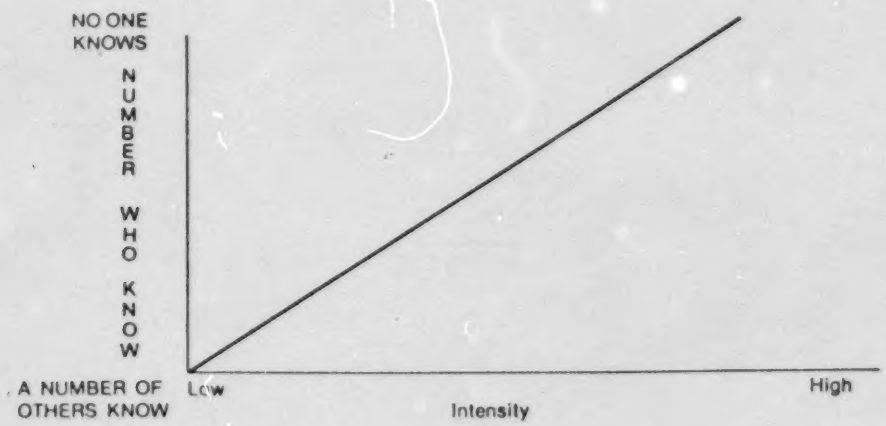

Figure 1. Degree of Intensity with Respect to Number Who Know

The discloser's relationship with the people who have received the disclosure affects the degree of intensity involved. For example, on the surface it might appear that the degree of intensity would be minimal for an individual who has disclosed information to two other people. However, when we consider the fact that one of these individuals is a spouse and the other is a life-time friend living in another state, a completely different picture emerges. Therefore, the degree of intimacy/closeness between the discloser and those who have received the disclosure becomes an important variable in defining intensity. Among those who have received the disclosure, as the intimacy/closeness of the relationship increases, the intensity increases. On the other hand, disclosures made to individuals with whom we are not at all intimate/close would likely be of low intensity. Figure 2 shows the interaction between intensity and the nature of the relationship.

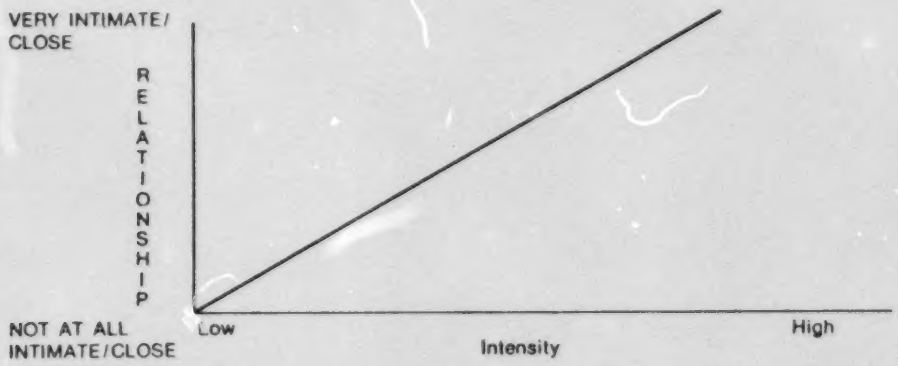

Figure 2. Degree of Intensity with Respect to Relationship between Discloser and Those Who Know

Thus far, we have characterized intensity of disclosure with respect to the following two variables: (1) number of others who have received the disclosure; (2) relationship between the discloser and those

who have received the disclosure. How does an understanding of these variables actually affect one's decision to disclose? If the intensity surrounding a disclosure is high as measured by the fact that (1) the discloser has told few, if any, people and (2) the discloser's relationship with those who do know is intimate/close, then it follows that the discloser has placed a great deal of subjective importance on the self-data. As the intensity (subjective importance) of the disclosure increases, the discloser will likely perceive more risk in making the disclosure. The more risk involved, the more vulnerable the discloser will be with respect to the disclosure. At any rate, the likelihood of disclosure decreases as the risk (perceived by the discloser) increases. More will be said about risk and vulnerability in the next section.

Another way of viewing the intensity associated with a given disclosure is to observe the degree of emotional involvement the discloser experiences during the act of disclosure. As the intensity associated with a disclosure increases and the discloser perceives a high level of risk operating, the discloser will likely exhibit cues demonstrative of the emotional involvement being experienced. The anxiety, tension, and threat that disclosers often feel during the act of disclosure are often very obvious to the receiver. Since high-level disclosures are often characterized by the communication of feelings and emotions, intensity can be subjectively evaluated by noting the presence of certain nonverbal cues. As the previous discussion of nonverbal cues indicated, eye contact, spatial distance, facial, bodily and gestural activity can aid in determining not only the type of emotion or feeling being expressed but the degree of intensity involved.

In operationalizing this dimension of intensity, some researchers have suggested having the discloser reveal self-data while recording GSRs, EKGs, or some other physiological measure of emotional reaction.

Another dimension important to an understanding of intensity concerns the importance that the discloser attributes to the function(s) that engaging in disclosure will serve. In Chapter 1, we noted that self-disclosure serves the following functions: (1) improves communication; (2) improves relationships; (3) fulfills needs; (4) improves self-concept. While these functions are obviously not the only ones that self-disclosure serves, they do provide a basis for conceptualizing intensity with respect to the perceived functions of disclosure to the discloser. For example, let us suppose that an individual is experiencing guilt about "the things I should have said" to a parent before death. Months pass and the burden of keeping this guilt inside is so great that disclosure becomes inevitable. In this case, intensity of disclosure is defined with respect to the value or importance that the discloser places on the functions which disclosure will serve. In this situation, it is likely that the decision to disclose will, among other things, be based largely on the benefits that disclosure will bring in fulfilling previously unsatisfied needs.

Nature of the Relationship

Most researchers are in agreement that the nature of the relationship between the discloser and the receiver of the disclosure is an important factor in determining patterns of disclosure. Is the disclosure appropriate to the stage at which the relationship has progressed? What are the expectations of both the discloser and the

receiver with respect to the disclosure? How much risk/vulnerability does the discloser perceive with respect to the receiver? It is our feeling that disclosers who consider these questions have a better chance of engaging in self-disclosing behavior which results in positive outcomes.

All relationships are characterized by specific norms and expectations which govern behavior appropriate to that relationship. When I was in school, it was generally considered inappropriate to "put the moves" on a girl on the first date. However, as the relationship progressed, with each date, there were increased expectations for familiarity. Disclosure, like familiarity in dating, is a gradual process. Too much revelation too early in the relationship can result in negative outcomes for both the discloser and the receiver of the disclosure.

Disclosures that are made without regard for the expectations which define appropriate behavior at a given stage in a relationship can result in negative outcomes. It appears that more personal and interpersonal growth occurs when disclosures are made at times appropriate to the expectations surrounding the stage of development of the relationship.

This discussion has suggested that discloser and receiver expectations play a large role in determining whether or not the act of disclosure contributes to personal and interpersonal growth. The more congruent the expectations between discloser and receiver with respect to the stage of development at which the relationship is operating, the greater the chance that disclosures will be made and received

so as to add to the personal and interpersonal growth of the participants. While the fulfillment of one's own interpersonal needs is important, the discloser interested in maximizing the potential for personal and interpersonal growth must attempt to strike a balance between individual needs and expectations concerning the relationship.

Another factor relating to the nature of the relationship concerns the discloser's perception of the degree of risk/vulnerability operating with respect to the disclosure. Since a discloser cannot always be certain that the receiver will react to the disclosure as expected, a certain amount of risk characterizes most attempts. Inherent in the understanding of risk is the suggestion that when the discloser is uncertain as to whether the receiver will hear and react to the disclosure as expected, a high degree of risk will be present, particularly with high intensity disclosures. The more risk involved, the more vulnerable the discloser may be with respect to the receiver.

With increased feelings of vulnerability, the discloser begins to place considerable importance on the obligations to be fulfilled by the receiver. Pledges of confidentiality and demonstrations of one's concern for the relationship are obligations typically placed on receivers. In an effort to protect their vulnerability, disclosers will often seek out personal information from their receivers. When receivers reciprocate by engaging in self-disclosure themselves, the disclosers' vulnerability with respect to the receivers is minimized. Not all receivers feel obligated to respond in these ways. The receiver's power or leverage over the discloser may reduce the extent of the receiver's obligation. Supervisor/subordinate relationships in organizations are typical of relationships characterized by differences in power or leverage.

The so-called "bus-rider phenomenon" (Drag, 1971) provides an interesting perspective for viewing the importance of risk/vulnerability in understanding one's decision of whether or not to disclose. Have you ever experienced a situation in which you were traveling by plane or bus and found that the person sitting next to you began revealing very personal things about himself? You are practically a stranger to this person and yet the person is telling you things that probably have not been shared with closer friends. Why does this phenomenon occur? In this situation, the discloser is risking nothing by his behavior. The fact that the receiver is practically a stranger with whom there is little chance of future interaction greatly reduces the risks involved in disclosure. The stranger-laboratory concept in sensitivity training is based on this notion. By interacting with individuals with whom no subsequent interaction "back home" is expected, the risk is reduced and more open and honest communication is promoted.

The Receiver

The preceding section has discussed many of the important issues relevant to understanding the role of the receiver in the process of self-disclosure. Since disclosures which are receiver-oriented will maximize possibilities for personal and interpersonal growth, disclosers interested in implementing this perspective should consider the following questions:

1. What are the receiver's expectations?
2. Is the disclosure appropriate to the stage at which the relationship is operating?
3. How much risk/vulnerability exists with respect to the receiver?

4. What obligations might the receiver perceive with respect to the disclosure?
5. How much power/leverage does the receiver have with respect to the relationship?

The specific identity of the receiver has already been mentioned as a factor affecting disclosure patterns. Pearce and Sharp (1973) have suggested a curvilinear relationship between closeness of the relationship between discloser and receiver and amount of disclosure. In other words, the closer the relationship, the greater the amount of disclosure, up to a point. Conceivably, once relationships reach a certain level of closeness, more disclosure does not add but may subtract from the closeness of the relationship. On the other hand, as the previous discussion has indicated, high-level disclosures are often made between strangers with whom no future interaction is expected.

Content of the Disclosure

Most experts agree that the content of a disclosure may affect one's decision to disclose. According to Culbert (1968) individuals may differ greatly in the content areas they choose to disclose. He suggests a number of reasons for this variance:

> An individual's values, areas of guilt, needs for privacy, perceptions of societal or referent-group norms, needs for acceptance, perceptions of rewards and punishments, needs for safety, and doubts of personal adequacy are some of the factors contributing to the choice of content for disclosure. (p. 25)

Jourard's (1971) research has focused on the types of information people are willing to share with others. In developing his questionnaire, he attempted to measure self-disclosure in relation to the following six

categories: (1) attitudes and opinions; (2) tastes and interests; (3) work; (4) money; (5) personality; and (6) body. His research found the personality and body categories to be particularly threatening, resulting in low disclosure patterns, and the attitudes and opinions, tastes and interests categories to be particularly low in threat, resulting in high disclosure patterns. Jourard is suggesting that to talk about food and beverage likes or your opinion regarding the economy is to talk about topics that are impersonal in nature. The focus is not on the character, personality, intimate affairs, conduct, or behavior of one's own self. The threat is obviously less because the focus is on something more external to the self. On the other hand, to talk about one's sexual inadequacies or personality problems is to talk about topics that are personal in nature. The focus is on the character, personality, intimate affairs, conduct, or behavior of one's own self. The threat is obviously high because the focus is internal or directly related to the self.

While it is apparent that social, situational, and relationship norms play a large role in determining whether or not specific content areas will be disclosed, the above discussion has suggested that topics can be hierarchically arranged with respect to their intimacy value. The discloser interested in maximizing the potential for personal and interpersonal growth must not forget the importance of disclosure content. The discloser who selects content keeping in mind information concerning social, situational, and relationship expectations has a better chance of engaging in self-disclosing behavior resulting in positive outcomes.

The Social Setting

Disclosers interested in maximizing positive outcomes with respect to their disclosures must consider the importance of the social setting. Since our behavior in particular situations is often determined by the norms operating in a given setting, a consideration of these norms by the discloser is essential in evaluating the possible consequences of a given disclosure.

There is some research to suggest that disclosure patterns vary with respect to the social context within which the disclosures are made. In an attempt to explore the self-disclosure determinant of situational context, Bugental, Tannenbaum, and Bobele (1969) found differential disclosure patterns depending on whether disclosures were made to work associates or social acquaintances.

It appears that disclosure patterns are greatly affected by the expectations operating in a given social setting. In other words, discussing personal sexual matters may be appropriate in more informal settings with a same-sex best friend. However, at a mixed company cocktail party, discussion of such topics would be considered "socially inappropriate." While the manager may perceive high expectations for disclosure at a weekend "encounter-group" setting, a different set of expectations may be operating to restrict such disclosures "back home" on the job. Senator Eagleton's disclosure regarding his previous mental illness provoked much discussion. Since the public expects high intellectual, ethical, and psychological standards from its political leaders, Eagleton's admission of psychological failing resulted in a violation of the behavior appropriate for such a public figure. In

other words, the norms of the political setting were incongruent with such an admission.

Receiver's Reaction (Feedback)

Once a specific disclosure has been made, the subsequent effect of that disclosure will depend on the reaction of the receiver. We might visualize receiver responses as appearing on a continuum: on one end, the receiver confirms the disclosure; in the middle the receiver neither confirms nor disconfirms; at the other end, the receiver disconfirms the disclosure.

When receivers confirm disclosures, such confirmation is likely an indicator of the positive effect of the disclosure on the relationship. There are numerous ways in which disclosures are confirmed. Some receivers may express agreement or show support for the disclosure made. Others may express confirmation by asking for more information or clarifying the specifics of the disclosure. The act of reciprocity discussed in the previous section is in a sense a behavioral index of the degree of confirmation expressed by the receiver. Receiver responses which are confirming are likely to increase the possibilities for further disclosure.

On the other hand, disclosures which disregard relationship and setting considerations are likely to evoke disconfirming responses from receivers. Some receivers may disregard the disclosure by not directly acknowledging it. Others may disconfirm the disclosure by shifting the direction of the interaction. Others may express their disconfirmation through silence and other nonverbal cues. The act of not reciprocating is, in essence, a form of disconfirmation to the act of disclosure.

The intensity or subjective importance attributed by a receiver to a self-disclosing statement is crucial in determining the nature of the receiver's response. Disclosures which the receiver perceives as being unimportant will generally evoke more neutral responses.

The following discussion has suggested that the process of interpersonal self-disclosure is a complex one. The attainment of interpersonal growth is not a matter of indiscriminately disclosing yourself to anyone, anytime, or anywhere. The effect of a given disclosure in maximizing interpersonal growth is dependent on the relationship between a number of specific components. The self-disclosing communication model shown in Figure 3 illustrates this relationship.

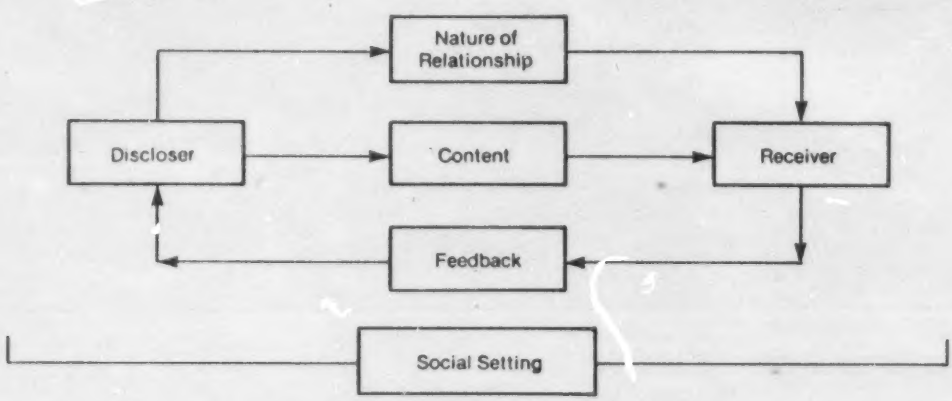

Figure 3. Self-Disclosing Communication Model

The discloser interested in maximizing the personal and interpersonal benefits of self-disclosure would do well to consider the components of this model. In other words, the decision to disclose should be a rhetorical one. By analyzing the significance of receiver, relationship, content, and social setting variables, one can more accurately predict the response and outcome of the disclosure. It is only through the use of such a rhetorical process that communicators can

increase the likelihood of making disclosures which promote rather than inhibit the development of effective interpersonal relationships.

This paper has taken a contingency perspective in viewing the self-disclosing relationship, suggesting that the decision to disclose or not to disclose is dependent on a number of interacting factors. Since we now have a conceptual understanding of self-disclosure and the self-disclosing relationship, it is appropriate that we discuss ways for improving our personal and interpersonal effectiveness.

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